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How Britain fell for the Peking game-plan

By Derek Davies In Hongkong

The most recent of many Western attempts to analyse Chinese bargaining techniques is a confidential study produced for the United States National Intelligence Council by the Rand Corp. It is based on the experience of senior US officials who negotiated with the Chinese throughout the 1970s in an effort to normalise Sino-US relations. The paper, privately circulated last year, was written by Richard Solomon, a China specialist involved in negotiations with Peking between 1971 and 1976 as a member of the US National Security Council and who today heads Rand's research programme on international security policies.

Among its main points:

- Chinese officials are single-minded



Thatcher: Initial error.

and disciplined in pursuit of Chinese interests, but distrustful of impersonal, legalistic negotiations. They always attempt to cultivate foreign officials sympathetic to their cause, manipulating personal relationships (guanxi) and feelings of friendship, obligation or guilt in an interplay between superior and dependent.

Plenty of material for China to work on here with the British, ranging from Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's initial legalistic approach — based on the "unequal treaties" — to the natural desire of British Embassy officials to boost Sino-British relations, plus guilt about the past, in particular the Opium Wars, which led to the foundation of Hongkong.

- The Chinese always seek to establish their own ground rules by pressing their foreign counterparts to agree to certain general "principles," which are later constantly invoked. Such principles, however, can be set aside in order to reach a desired agreement — which may in fact clearly contravene the principles earlier insisted on.

After the agreement with Thatcher in September 1982 to open the talks, no progress whatsoever was made until the British had accepted two "principles." The first was that sovereignty over Hongkong would revert to Peking on 1 July 1997 (a concession made — conditional to the conclusion of a satisfactory agreement — in a letter from Thatcher to Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang in spring 1983). The second was that responsibility for the administration of Hongkong would also revert (this was also conditionally conceded, in another Thatcher message to Zhao in the autumn of 1983). The British have yet to push hard enough to ascertain whether these "principles" are flexible or non-negotiable.

- Peking's negotiating positions are highly sensitive to the play of China's own political factionalism: a strong leader can promote a policy which a collective leadership would be unable to support, or a negotiating position may be withdrawn or hardened as a result of factional conflict. The more rigid and posturing a negotiator, or the more "irrational" the posture, the more internal factional pressures are influencing the negotiations.

In this context, Solomon notes the Chinese use of symbols (from ping-pong to pandas) and oblique hints. In 1971, during Henry Kissinger's secret trip to Peking to arrange former US president Richard Nixon's 1972 visit, the late Chinese premier Zhou Enlai hinted at conflict with the Chinese leadership by omitting the name of then defence minister Lin Biao from an official list. In 1973, the late chairman Mao Zedong indicated to US visitors

that he deprecated the political ambitions of his wife, Jiang Qing, by telling Kissinger that China's women were too numerous and caused "disasters."

Obviously, the terms under which China recovers part of its territory from colonial rule is a highly sensitive issue on which those wishing to compromise for China's economic benefit are vulnerable to dogmatists and nationalistic elements within the party. In June 1983, elder statesman Deng Xiaoping appeared to have reasserted himself against elements which opposed his pragmatic line. However, little or no progress was reportedly made at the most recent session — the 15th — of the Sino-British talks, held shortly after Deng had brusquely contradicted assurances on Hongkong given by fellow Chinese leaders, including a former defence minister. This occurred during a session of the National People's Congress at which Hongkong evidently became a bone of contention between elements of the party and the army.

- The Chinese prefer to negotiate on their own territory for being at home aids internal communications, decision-making and their orchestration of the ambience of negotiations — from banquet toasts to the manipulation of the press.

The 1997 talks are being held in Peking, where the British bravely claim that there is no significance in the changes in the relatively lowly venues allocated for the meetings. While the British remain stiffly uncommunicative to the press (in line with the "confidentiality" imposed by Thatcher), the Chinese give press conferences and briefings and arrange leaks — all gobbled up by the Hongkong media.

- The Chinese often use a trusted intermediary to convey their pre-negotiating position to a foreign government in a deniable or face-saving manner in order to "load" the agenda of their foreign counterpart. Thus they used the Pakistani Government in 1971 to communicate their stance to the Nixon administration prior to Kissinger's secret visit.

Peking evidently used former Bri-

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